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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MIKATI EXPECTS TO RUN WITH HARIRI

REF: 08 BEIRUT 1773

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a January 26 meeting with the Ambassador, Former Prime Minister Najib Mikati said his talks with Saad Hariri on an electoral alliance in Tripoli were going well, and he expected he and Hariri would run jointly in the upcoming parliamentary elections. He believed the National Dialogue would lead to nothing, but assessed that President Michel Sleiman was using the time before the elections to demonstrate his "wisdom," which would give him credibility to arbitrate among all parties following the June 7 parliamentary elections.

¶2. (C) Mikati said both the Saudis and the Syrians need reconciliation to work, and supposed that Syrian President Bashar Asad would use it to play the Iranians and the Arabs off each other, strengthening Syria's position. For Lebanon, the reconciliation might bring calm in advance of the elections, he believed, but if Lebanese leaders did not use the calm to strengthen the Lebanese state, the "tumor" of Hizballah would continue to grow. Mikati said the Lebanese had shown "maturity" during the Gaza fighting, and assessed Hizballah had acted responsibly. Meanwhile, Mikati said he did not understand the GOL's strong rejection of even indirect talks with Israel while the Syrians were at the negotiating table with the Israelis. End summary.

TRIPOLI ALLIANCES:
TALKS WITH HARIRI POSITIVE

¶3. (C) The Ambassador called on Former PM Najib Mikati at his office in Achrafieh January 26. Pol/Econ Chief, EconOff, and Senior LES Pol Advisor also attended the meeting. The Ambassador asked Mikati how negotiations were proceeding on electoral alliances in Tripoli. Mikati seemed sincerely pleased with his meetings with Saad Hariri, whom he described as "taking two steps to my one," making a positive effort to find a way forward together. Mikati stressed his commitment to Lebanese Sunnis and maintaining credibility with them, and he noted that Hariri's Future Movement represents more Sunnis nationally than any other party. Regardless of the results of the elections, said Mikati, it will be crucial for him to

be on good terms with Hariri. Asked if he would run on the Future Movement electoral list in Tripoli, Mikati responded, "The Future list will run with me."

¶4. (C) As for the other big Sunni politicians in Tripoli, Mikati deemed it virtually impossible that he would ally with former PM Omar Karame, but said he had not yet spoken to Tripoli heavyweight and current March 14 Minister of Economy Mohammed Safadi about his plans for the elections. Mikati indicated that Hariri wanted to keep Safadi on board any alliance the two of them might form, but Mikati believed Safadi might be concerned Hariri would impede his path to the Prime Ministry, given expectations that Hariri would take the position for himself. Mikati played down his own ambitions to the job: "I have been Prime Minister before, I do not need to do it again. If I get the opportunity, great, I know the issues, and I will be happy to serve. But if not, that is fine." Mikati acknowledged his concern about possible election violence in his native city, and claimed he would pull out of the election if he felt he was the reason for a breakout of violence.

ELECTORAL PROSPECTS IN NORTHERN LEBANON

¶5. (C) Regarding other electoral districts in the north, Mikati believed Suleiman Franjeh's Marada party was well-positioned, and would likely take at least two out of three seats in Zgharta, while in Koura the SSNP and March 14 would each take a seat, while the winner of the third would depend on Michel Aoun's choice of candidate for his Free Patriotic Movement. He expected Future would take all the seats in Akkar, though he acknowledged that if Future took the district for granted, opposition candidates could make inroads there.

¶6. (C) Mikati believed Christian businessman Neemat Frem would run as an independent in Keserwan, but did not believe an independent list would emerge before the elections. Nonetheless, he saw the possibility of a group of MPs forming a "logical, practical political movement, based on a strong state," after the elections, and did not reject the idea of his own participation in such a group. He lamented the lack of opportunity for independent Shia competing, given the structure of the new electoral law, which does not allow for proportional representation.

¶7. (C) Mikati said Michel Aoun's strategy of casting himself as a regional Christian leader was paying off, and the Iranians and Syrians were helping to cultivate the image. He suggested that even the award of a management contract for one of Lebanon's mobile telecom companies to the Egyptian company Orascom, under the supervision of Aoun's son-in-law, Telecom Minister Gebran Bassil, was intended to send a signal, since Orascom's CEO, Naguib Sawiris, is a Coptic Christian. Mikati said Aoun's objective is to become president, and if the opposition came to power and "something happened to the president," he would likely want to take the presidency.

SLEIMAN BUILDING CREDIBILITY

¶8. (C) Mikati believed the National Dialogue would not yield results before the elections, but suggested that President Sleiman, both through the Dialogue and his dealings with the various political leaders, was attempting to demonstrate "wisdom" in order to convince all parties of his calm, cool, and even-handed character. If Sleiman can attain the image of a "wise" leader, said Mikati, he may have the credibility to act as a real arbitrator among political leaders following the elections. Mikati assessed that Sleiman will not risk his credibility before the elections by sponsoring an independent electoral list (this is consistent with what President Sleiman told the Ambassador on January 27, septel).

BASHAR PLAYING BOTH SIDES

¶9. (C) Mikati termed the Saudi-Syrian reconciliation at the January 19-20 Kuwait Economic Summit positive, saying both sides wanted a breakthrough to calm regional strains. He believed Syria's Bashar Asad had found himself in a corner, with only Iran as an ally, and determined he needed a stronger relationship with the Arabs in order to play the role of "the middle man, instead of the puppet." Like his father did before him, said Mikati, Bashar is looking to play both sides. Meanwhile, he stressed, the Saudis need a way to ease tensions with Iran. He noted that Saudi Arabia has a large Shia population that could become restive if the relationship with Iran remained strained.

¶10. Mikati predicted the reconciliation would be good for Lebanon, calming political tensions in advance of the elections and providing an opportunity for Lebanon to take a neutral position in the Arab world. He was concerned, however, that the calm would lead to complacency among Lebanese politicians, preventing them from pushing reforms that would strengthen the Lebanese state. Mikati feared that if Lebanon's leaders did not work to strengthen the "body," i.e., the state, then the "tumor" of Hizballah would merely grow stronger during a lull in tensions. He referred to Lebanon's massive debt and budget deficit as "poison for the state," and noted the GOL's inability to appoint high officials because of political squabbles. "The state merely gets weaker, while Hizballah has a plan, and gets stronger," said Mikati.

"LEBANON SHOWED MATURITY"
DURING GAZA WAR

¶11. (C) Mikati was pleased that Lebanon had stayed out of the recent Gaza conflict, and said the Lebanese responded in a mature fashion to the fighting. He said Hizballah knew, because Israel had made it clear, that any action it took against Israel would reflect on the Lebanese state, and they acted "responsibly" in that context. "We must give credit to Hizballah for this," he said. He saw no political benefit from the conflict for Hamas, and wondered how it could declare victory when so many of its people were killed or wounded in the fighting. The Ambassador asked if there had been fallout from the violence in Gaza in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, and referred to reports that PFLP-GC fighters had been smuggled into Beddawi camp. Mikati replied that there is always an arms trade in the camps, and the situation did not seem worse than usual. "The Beddawi camp, it's a ghetto," he said. "It is not controlled by the government. You can always expect anything."

¶12. (C) Mikati said he was surprised the GOL had reacted so strongly against the idea of indirect peace talks with Israel, considering Syria had been pursuing its own talks. Though he admitted Lebanon had "delicate local issues" with regard to Israel, he saw it as logical that Lebanon should participate in any Syrian peace process with Israel. "Otherwise, the negotiations will happen at the expense of Lebanon," he declared.

SISON